Nehru on Communism: An Awakening

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In July 1958 Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India set down for confidential circulation to a number of friends his views on the international situation and on certain problems facing India and the world. Some of those receiving his letter, feeling that Nehru's observations on many of the important problems of the day deserved a wider circulation than they were receiving, prevailed on Nehru to agree to its publication. Subsequently the letter was published under the title "The Basic Approach" in the 15 August issue of the *A.I.C.C. Economic Review*, an official organ of India's ruling Congress Party.

As leader of the world's second most populous country (one-seventh of the world's population) and of the neutralist, uncommitted states, Nehru is a man whose words always command attention. In the present instance, his remarks are of especial interest and significance, for they reveal that his thinking on Communism has undergone a basic change, that at last he sees Communism as it really is. In this article he publicly condemns Communism for the first time, citing specifically its addiction to violence, its corruption of ends, its suppression of human freedoms, and its contempt for all spiritual and moral values.

Nehru has long been the world's most vigorous exponent of neutralism and its most prominent opponent of blocs and alliances. To much of the West, however, this neutralist stand has appeared more often than not as an apology for the Communist world. In the past he has censored the actions of the West and questioned its sincerity while excusing or justifying measures taken by the Soviet Bloc countries.

In late 1956, especially, the Free World was profoundly shocked, and even his warmest supporters in India were perturbed, by the attitude which India adopted in the Hungarian affair. Frank Moraes, well-known Indian journalist and Nehru's biographer and long-time friend, was later moved to write that "I must confess to a sense of acute embarrassment when India abstained in the General Assembly in November on the vote condemning Russia's action

in Hungary, and to discomfiture and dismay when we actually opposed the proposal that the Soviet troops should be asked to withdraw from Hungary."

This dismay was considerably deepened when Nehru, speaking to the Indian Parliament on 19 November 1956, suggested that the Hungarian situation had been grossly exaggerated by the West to divert attention from its own acts in Egypt, and said that in any case the Soviet troop intervention in Hungary was justified under the terms of the Warsaw Pact. Although Soviet deportation of young men from Hungary to the USSR had been authenticated, he indicated he accepted completely Soviet and Hungarian denials, remarking that young men or workers were probably simply being sent on an inspection tour. The West understandably found such naivete—one might say gullibility—difficult to fathom.

Nehru also has disturbed Western sensibilities—and delighted the hearts of the Communists—by his unceasing attacks on the West for its "colonialism" and "imperialism." Ignoring the fact that Western democracies have since the end of the war granted independence to his own country as well as to a host of others (Pakistan, Burma, Ceylon, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, the Sudan, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Ghana, etc.), he continues to refuse to believe that the West can act toward Asia without ulterior designs. At the same time he rejects any contention that Soviet domination of Eastern Europe can be classified as an act of imperialism or that Soviet control of vast non-Russian areas of Central Asia in any way resembles colonialism. A particularly striking statement of this warped view of Soviet actions and policies was contained in the address which Nehru made to the West German Foreign Policy Association in Bonn on 15 July 1956.

In fact, in every field, Nehru has amassed a record of partiality towards the Soviet Bloc that belies his expressed policy of neutralism—a record which has led Moraes to write that "the one criticism which can be made against our policy of non-alignment is not that it is unsuited to the needs of our country or unrealistic, but that in implementing it we have often laid ourselves open to the charge that we are inclined more in favor of the totalitarian countries such as Russia and China than of the democracies. The complaint is often heard—and I personally feel it is legitimate—that in cases where we might have given the benefit of the doubt to the democracies, we have chosen to give it to the totalitarian countries."

With respect to Communist ideology, Nehru has been described as a "Marxist by intellectual conviction," and has not infrequently voiced his admiration for Communist doctrine and alleged objectives. Speaking at Muzafarpur on 3 April 1949 and at Bilaspur on 18 December 1951, for example, he asserted that he had "no quarrel with the fundamental principles of Communism." In

his autobiography Nehru wrote that “Soviet Russia’s success or failure did not affect the soundness of the theory of Communism. The Bolsheviks may blunder or even fail because of national or international reasons, and yet the Communist theory may be correct.”

This expressed admiration for Communist theory and objectives might, at first glance, appear to be at variance with the harsh treatment which Nehru has habitually directed towards the Communist Party of India (CPI). However, closer investigation reveals that in criticizing the CPI, Nehru has, without exception, been careful to disassociate the Party from international Communism, implying that the CPI would be welcomed if only it would conform to true Communism. A few quotes from various Nehru speeches will suffice to illustrate this point: “The Communism of the Indian variety is completely at variance with the fundamental principles of Communism.” “The policy of the CPI is not in accord with the principles of Communism.” “I have no hesitation in declaring that the greatest enemy of Communism is the CPI.” “Indian Communists are reactionaries whose only revolution consists of copying other countries, regardless of local conditions.”

It is in the light of this past record that Nehru’s recent article gains significance, for it is the first time that he has unequivocally attacked the validity of Communism or directed criticism at the Soviet Union. The fact that the article also has unkind words for Western capitalism is not particularly noteworthy since this represents no change in Nehru’s thinking. His statements on Communism, however, definitely reflect a radical reappraisal.

Nehru, the one-time “Marxist by intellectual conviction,” has apparently awakened to the fact that Marxism-Communism is not the inevitable culmination of man’s hope for a better world, conceived in terms of economics. “Marxist economics,” he writes, “are in many ways out of date.” He also observes that “Communism comes in the wake of disillusionment and offers some kind of faith and some kind of discipline. To some extent it fills a vacuum. It succeeds in some measure by giving a content to man’s life. *But in spite of its apparent success, it fails, partly because of its rigidity, but, even more so, because it ignores certain essential needs of human nature*” (italics added).

Above all, as a disciple of Gandhi, and thus committed to the peaceful approach to problems, and as a democrat, and thus opposed to the stifling of all political freedom—an inevitable concomitant of Communism—Nehru appears to have awakened at last to the basic evils of Communism. Where once he was willing to justify or overlook Communist methods, he is now repelled by those methods. “Communism,” he writes, “has definitely allied itself to the approach of violence. Even if it does not indulge normally in

physical violence, its language is of violence, its thought is violent, and it does not seek change by persuasion or peaceful democratic pressures, but by coercion and indeed by destruction and extermination." In his autobiography Nehru had linked fascism and imperialism as "the two faces of now decaying capitalism," but now he proceeds from his condemnation of Communist violence to say that "fascism has all these evil aspects of violence and extermination." It should be gratifying to all democrats, whatever their nationality, to learn that Nehru has at last realized the truth of their assertions that there is little difference between fascism and Communism except a name.

Nehru returns several times to this identification of Communism with violence. Speaking of the Communist suppression of political freedoms, Nehru comments that "its suppression of individual freedom brings about powerful reactions. Its contempt for what might be called the moral and spiritual side of life not only ignores something that is basic in man, but also deprives human behavior of standards and values. Its unfortunate association with violence encourages a certain evil tendency in human beings."

This is remarkably like the observations expressed by Milovan Djilas in *The New Class*. These sentiments suggest that Nehru has been profoundly shocked by the most recent Soviet suppression of individual freedom in forcing Boris Pasternak, the world renowned author of *Dr. Zhivago*, to reject the Nobel Prize for Literature because that work, instead of praising the Soviet system in the slavish manner required by the Soviet regime of its writers, undertakes to expose some of the same defects of Communism that Nehru himself touches on in his article.

It is also noteworthy that Nehru no longer justifies the Soviet repression in Hungary or accepts the Kremlin explanation that the revolt was the work of "fascists" in the pay of "Western imperialists." "What happened in Hungary," Nehru now says, "demonstrated that the desire for national freedom is stronger than any ideology and cannot ultimately be suppressed. What happened in Hungary was not essentially a conflict between Communism and anti-Communism. It represented nationalism striving for freedom from foreign control."

Communist theory holds that the contradictions in capitalist society will inevitably lead to class conflict which will result in the triumph of the best of all possible systems, i.e., Communism. Nehru now decisively rejects this view with the remark that "it is absurd to imagine that out of conflict — the social progressive forces this is what the Communists allege themselves to be — are bound to win." He further observes that "We see the growing contradictions within the rigid framework of Communism." In expressing continued

admiration for some of the material achievements of the Soviet Union, especially its system of education and health, which he describes as "probably the best in the world" (in this age of sputniks even the most confirmed anti-Communist will admit the excellence of Soviet education), Nehru nevertheless observes: "But it is said, and rightly, that there is suppression of individual freedom there. And yet the spread of education in all its forms is itself a tremendous liberating force which ultimately will not tolerate that suppression. This again is another contradiction."

In a passage, again strongly reminiscent of Djilas, Nehru writes that "Communism became too closely associated with the necessity for violence and thus the idea which it placed before the world became a tainted one. Means distorted ends. We see here the powerful influence of wrong means and ends." Returning again to the role of the individual in society, Nehru observes that "Democracy and socialism are means to an end, not the end itself. We talk of the good of society. Is this something apart from and transcending the good of the individuals composing it? If the individual is ignored and sacrificed for what is considered the good of society, is that the right objective to have?"

The Communists would of course answer these questions in the affirmative, but it is clear that Nehru feels that the answer to both questions is an unqualified "No!" As he puts it, "we should not forget the basic human element and the fact that our objective is individual improvement and the lessening of inequalities; and we must not forget the ethical and spiritual aspects of life which are ultimately the basis of culture and civilization and which have given some meaning to life.

Inasmuch as Communism and the Soviet system recognize neither ethical nor spiritual values and, in fact, emphatically reject them; inasmuch as the Soviet system rejects the value of the individual and recognizes the importance and rights only of the Communist Party, these observations appear to leave no doubt that Nehru, after long years of evincing a partiality towards the Soviet system, has now unequivocally ranged himself on the side of the Free World in the East–West ideological struggle even though he still refrains from aligning his country with it politically.

These statements from Nehru's article constitute in their entirety a strong indictment of Communism and the Soviet system. Such a significant departure by Nehru from his past statements raises the question, what led Nehru to revise his views? Aside from the fact that Nehru is an intelligent man whom the Soviets could not possibly mislead forever, the most logical answer seems to lie in the political situation in the south Indian state of Kerala, where the Communists have been in power for the past 20 months.

Previously, Nehru had known Communism only theoretically or on the international plane where other factors intervened which tended to arouse in him sympathy for the Soviet experiment and to make him close his eyes to its evil manifestations. The terrorism, subversion and other illegal activities carried out by the CPI he could, and did, excuse as the misapplication of Communist principles by a small unimportant party overly eager to gain power, which that party would not necessarily follow if and when it should ever gain power. The actions of the present regime in Kerala, however, have been such that Nehru can no longer deceive himself.

Kerala, the smallest state in the Indian Union, is a backward, predominantly agricultural area on India's southwestern coast, with an area of 15,035 square miles and a population of 13.6 million. Created on 1 November 1956, in the reorganization of Indian states along linguistic lines, it combines the former princely states of Travancore and Cochin (except for the latter's Tamil-speaking southern tip, which was ceded to Madras) and the Malabar, a coastal area of Madras where Malayalam is spoken.

Aside from small groups of Brahmins, Jews and Parsees, comprising together only four percent of the population, Kerala's population falls into five distinct communal groups. The Exhavas, who are economically and educationally backward Hindus, form the largest group, with 3.6 million. Christians—about 50 percent Roman Catholics and the rest communicate various Protestant and Orthodox denominations—are second with 3.3 million. Muslims, who live chiefly in the northern part of the state, number 2.8 million. Next, with 2.3 million, are the Nairs, who are influential middle-class Hindus. The fifth and smallest community—about one million in numbers—is composed of another Hindu class, whose members were formerly untouchables and are proverbially poor.

In the March 1957 elections, the Communists, to the surprise and consternation of the ruling Congress Party as well as of democrats everywhere, emerged as the strongest party in the state, winning 60 of the 126 seats in the state legislature and 34.68 percent of the total votes cast. The support of five of the six independents elected gave them a slight but working majority and permitted them to form, on 5 April 1957, the first Communist state government in the history of India. Consigned to the opposition were the Congress Party (42 seats, 37.45 percent of the votes), the Muslim League (8 seats, 13.32 percent of the votes), and the Praja Socialist Party (9 seats, 11.3 percent of the votes). The Revolutionary Socialists, who were in close association with the CPI, polled 3.22 percent of the votes but failed to win any seats.

The Communist victory resulted from a variety of causes. The CPI in Kerala is

led by Nairs and therefore had the support of that community. The Exhavas, too, are notorious as a community for their Communist leanings, and the depressed classes follow suit, both believing they have everything to gain and nothing to lose from Communism. Equally important was the role of the Congress Party itself. Confident that Nehru's popularity would ensure it victory, the Congress Party made few campaign efforts, while the CPI, in contrast, conducted a vigorous drive, promising solutions to many problems which the incumbent Congress administration had failed to solve. Adding to the Congress Party's disadvantage was its reputation for corruption, which led many businessmen and Catholics, normally Congress supporters, to abstain from voting as a sign of disapproval of Congress policies. The highly literate Kerala population (53 percent literate as compared to a national average of 18 percent), avid for books but too poor to buy them, eagerly accepted the mass of books and magazines printed in local languages which the Communists distributed, all of them depicting in glowing terms the advantages accruing to the populace in all countries under Communist rule.

Nehru, who is popular with all Indians whether Congress Party members or not, must personally share in the responsibility for the Communist victory. His failure in the past to condemn Communism and to link Indian Communists with such evils as Russian and Chinese slave labor camps and purges, his frequently stated belief that the Soviet Union was not so much responsible for world tensions as the US and its allies and their policies, the warm welcomes extended to Khrushchev, Bulgarian and other Soviet and satellite leaders — all these factors helped to give the Communists a respectability in the eyes of the people that they would otherwise have lacked.

The Communist campaign was based on promises to solve the food and unemployment problems, give shelter to the homeless, start new industries, and nationalize the British-owned rubber, tea, coffee and spice plantations lining Kerala's mountain slopes. These were all attractive to the voters of Kerala, for the existing low standards of living and economic hardships are as serious as anywhere in India. The new Communist regime under Chief Minister E. M. S. Namboodiripad, however, found that it was easier to make promises than to fulfill them. Recognizing that they were not going to be able to solve Kerala's problems, the Communists decided on a simple rule: they would do what they could inside the state but when they were faced with major problems, they would say, "That is for the Central Government. Until we have a Communist Central Government you cannot expect to get a solution."

This, for example, is what happened in the case of nationalization of the plantations. As the Communists well knew, nationalization is, under the

Indian constitution, a matter for the Central Government to decide. The Constitution, moreover, requires immediate and proper compensation, which the Kerala treasury was of course unable to provide. Consequently, immediately upon assuming office, Namboodiripad dropped the idea with the explanation that his regime was being prevented by Delhi from taking action in the matter.

Similarly, the Red regime in Kerala charges that the state's continuing food problem is the result of discriminatory treatment by the Central Government. This charge was categorically denied by Union Food Minister A. P. Jain on 27 October 1958, who asserted that the responsibility lay entirely in the actions of the state government. The truth is that the Communists, indifferent to the suffering of the people, have been playing politics in the matter of food. It was recently revealed that in making rice purchases in the neighboring state of Madras, the Kerala government not only used its own hand-picked men instead of established dealers and commission agents but also paid higher than current market prices, which has led Indian observers to conclude that the transactions were used as a means of replenishing Party coffers from the state treasury.

The Red regime, in fact, has seemed to be primarily interested in intrenching itself permanently in power. To gain support of labor, Namboodiripad announced with much fanfare that henceforth the police would not be used in "an anti-people way" in labor-management disputes, while simultaneously the regime has strengthened its hold on labor unions. Landless agricultural laborers and plantation workers, disappointed in their hopes of taking over nationalized plantations, have been wooed by vigorous enforcement of anti-eviction laws coupled with orders to the police not to interfere with illegal seizures of property. The result has been a wave of violence and lawlessness and a breakdown of law and order. Communist-led union activity has degenerated into mutilation of management property and skull cracking between rival union gangs. Other lawless mobs have been set free to pillage landowners and to usurp lands and dwellings in the certainty that they have nothing to fear from the law.

Another aspect of the breakdown of law and order has been the establishment of local CPI committees in villages, which are usurping the duties of local law courts. Persons refusing to deal with these committees are soon brought into line by arbitrary arrest, discriminatory taxation, and the threat of violence. In an unknown number of cases, the threat of violence has become a reality as gangs of Communist-led thugs beat, knife and murder outspoken opponents of the regime.

The lawlessness unleashed by the Red regime has had the inevitable result of

scaring off any possible new industries; and since the state itself possesses few natural resources to support local industries, unemployment remains as high as ever. The unemployment problem is particularly critical in Kerala because each year the network of schools which account for the state's high literacy rate turn out thousands of educated youths for whom jobs are lacking. Adding to the difficulty is the fact that agriculture has reached the point of saturation. Statistically, there are about 1,000 people to the square mile; but when forest land, arid land and water area are deducted it comes to about three times that figure, making the pressure on land in Kerala tighter than anywhere else in India. The population continues to grow but the land does not. Of the 1.9 million landowners in Travancore-Cochin, for example, 94.1 percent possess holdings of less than three acres, and 38.1 percent have less than one acre. The regime's land reform measures have resulted in the distribution of some land. While some types of landlordism are being ended, the very low ceiling put on the acreage a family may possess only tends to reduce the food production of the state, which already suffers from a heavy food deficit.

The rising opposition generated by all these Communist actions led the Kerala Communist Party recently to issue a call to "all those interested in the progress of Kerala" to organize "local citizens' committees" to prevent the opposition from "launching unnecessary agitations with the object of pulling down the Communist regime in the state." As Sadiq Ali, General Secretary of the Congress Party, pointed out in August 1958, "Communists outside the government have taken upon themselves the task of quelling the agitation, and the state government has been withdrawing prosecution cases, mostly against members of the ruling party." According to Ali, this could only be interpreted to mean that the Kerala regime was "averse to the normal functioning of opposition parties and indeed of the democratic system." Ali charged that the Red regime had cancelled prosecution or commuted the sentences of 500 Party members and had transferred or suspended various police officers for arresting Communist law-breakers.

This Communist perversion of law and order was further highlighted by Praja Socialist leader Jai Prakash Narayan who, in an address in Madras on 22 October 1958, charged that Namboodiripad and his associates were trying to get state civil servants into their political machine and that even police officers were being persuaded secretly to join the CPI. Apparently aware of the pattern of events which reduced Eastern Europe to Communist servitude, Narayan warned his audience that it was easy to imagine what would happen to democracy in India if police officers, judges and magistrates were to become members of the CPI.

The intentions of the Communist regime have also been strikingly revealed

by its attempts to bend the education system completely to its will. On 25 July 1957, only three months after taking office, Joseph Mundassery, the state Minister of Education, submitted to the legislature a bill designed to give the state complete control over any private school receiving state funds — which includes virtually every private school in the state. Although the threat posed by the bill had the immediate effect of uniting the usually warring Christian sects and the Muslims in opposition to the bill, they were unable to prevent the regime from pushing the bill through the legislature with typical rough-shod Communist tactics. Despite the importance of the matter, the Communists allowed only 13 hours of debate in all stages; and of 1,400 persons who asked to testify, only 38 were heard.

While the legislature made some slight changes in the text, the bill as passed on 2 September 1957 was unchanged in its major provisions. These provide (1) that all teachers must be selected from Government-prepared lists, and (2) that the state is empowered to nationalize any government-aided private school on proof of "mismanagement." These provisions do not seem too objectionable until it is remembered that the government, meaning the CPI, will control the preparation of the lists of eligible teachers and that, according to the bill, the government is to be the sole judge of alleged "mismanagement," with no appeal to the courts permitted. It is not difficult to discern that the Communists' objective is to convert the entire school system into a Communist propaganda outlet and training center.

Fortunately for the bill's opponents, the bill had to be signed by Indian President Rajendra Prasad before becoming law, and he, upon receiving it, referred it to the Supreme Court to ascertain its constitutionality. The Court decided on 22 May 1958 that certain clauses did indeed violate minority rights guaranteed by the Constitution. The Union Government is now studying the verdict preparatory to advising the President on what course to take.

The tensions aroused by the school bill and the other regime actions, and the general lawlessness resulting from the stifling of police activity resulted in early August 1958 in state-wide disturbances. Trouble began in the coastal district of Alleppey when students protested cancellation of a student discount on ferryboat fares. In succeeding days hundreds of students, who were also protesting higher tuition rates and Communist textbooks in school, were jailed and some beaten senseless. Political demonstrators clashed in a melee of fists, stones, spears and daggers that left five dead and seven injured. The climax came outside the town of Quinlon, when police, acting on direct orders of Communist officials, fired into a crowd of strikers.

The firing on workers, whom they claimed to represent, was distinctly

embarrassing to the Communists. The explanation that Namboodiripad gave was similar to the Khrushchev refrain on Hungary, namely, a charge that the strikers and students had been misled by *agents provocateurs*. The Central Secretariat of the CPI issued a 1,200-word resolution on the affair, which did little but offer the lame conclusion that the shooting had been "an unfortunate incident." Unhappily for the Communists, these explanations did not end the matter. The Kerala Congress Party and its Socialist allies called for a general strike as a sign of protest. Students stayed away from the schools, 10,000 dock workers left their jobs in the port of Cochin, bazars and factories throughout the state closed for a day, and strikes, demonstrations and picketing occurred everywhere. The regime's only answer to the situation was to reply with the repression and violence which Nehru has now realized is an integral part of Communism. On orders, the police charged demonstrators with steel-tipped i, injuring an unknown number. The Revolutionary Socialist Party, which had supported the Namboodiripad regime until that point, switched to the opposition and denounced the Communists for "organized totalitarianism."

It is this example of Communist administration which, more than any other factor, would appear to explain Nehru's change of attitude towards Communism. Several months after the Communists first took over in Kerala, Nehru spoke of the "extreme propriety" with which the regime was conducting itself. In August 1957, on the eve of the tenth anniversary of India's independence, President Prasad told a Kerala audience that "I am happy that this great experiment which is being made in your state is going to serve as a great lesson not only to other states, but to the country as a whole, as an example of co-existence, of living and working together, in spite of all differences, for the good of all."

Subsequent developments in Kerala, however, have shown the Indian leaders how mistaken their original opinions were. By June 1958 Nehru was expressing displeasure over the acts of political terrorism taking place there. At a news conference on 7 September 1958 he again voiced concern about the "political insecurity" in Kerala, and said his worries were being confirmed by reports reaching him. Rejecting the Communist charge of *agents provocateurs*, he asserted that the Communists themselves bore the main responsibility for the prevailing "psychology of insecurity" in the state.

That the Indian national leadership has lost the last traces of any illusions it might have had is indicated by the resolution adopted by the All India Congress Committee, the governing body of the Congress Party, on 27 October 1958 at the conclusion of a three-day meeting in Hyderabad. The resolution expressed concern at the continuing insecurity in Kerala, the prevalence of attacks and murderous assaults, and the policy of the state

government, which was “often discriminatory and not in accordance with the law.” Since the Committee is usually responsive to Nehru’s views, it can be assumed that he fully agreed with the resolution.

It is probable that the situation in Kerala is going to get worse before it improves, for Namboodiripad has already threatened his opponents with more of the violence to which “Communism has definitely allied itself.” In June 1958 he appealed to the opposition parties to cultivate “an attitude of mutual criticism and mutual struggle with a view to mutual correction in the interests of the nation as a whole.” In the same breath, however, he warned that if the opposition parties persisted in their anti-Communism there would inevitably arise a situation in which the two contending groups would be forced to embark on a policy of mutual annihilation leading to a national tragedy like the protracted civil war in China. If Namboodiripad and the CPI should attempt to carry out this threat, Nehru, despite his reluctance to interfere with any state’s sovereign rights, may feel compelled to suspend the state’s constitution and impose President’s rule, which the Union constitution permits in emergency situations. The possible necessity of such action has clearly occurred to Nehru, for at his 7 September press conference he admitted that in the long run peaceful coexistence between the Central Government and the Communist administration in Kerala may not be possible. Friends of Indian democracy, both at home and abroad, can only hope that Nehru will not wait too long before acting. His new realization of the true nature of Communism and its inherent evils gives grounds for hope.

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